

The Discourse-Pragmatic Functions of 'Samm' in Najdi Arabic

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المستخلص

تقدّم هذه الدراسة أول تحليل تجريبي للوسيط التداولي متعدد الوظائف سمّ في سياق اللهجة النجدية، وهو سياق لم يحظَ بدراسة كافية. وعلى الرغم من ارتفاع تواتره وأهميته الثقافية، لم يُوصَف سمّ وصفاً منهجياً في الدراسات السابقة. واستناداً إلى 220 تفاعلاً طبيعياً، تحدد الدراسة ثماني وظائف رئيسية لسمّ، مبيّنة دوره المحوري في إدارة التفاعل بين المتخاطبين، إذ تمثل هذه الوظيفة أكثر من 70٪ من مجمل استخداماته. ويكشف التحليل أن سمّ يُعد مورداً نحويّاً مُضفّياً عليه الطابع النحوي، يتشكّل معناه بصورة ديناميكية من خلال التقييم الصوتي، والسياق التتابعي، والمعرفة الثقافية المشتركة، كما يؤدي وظائف متعددة تشمل تخفيف تهديد الوجه الاجتماعي، وتنظيم الأدوار الحوارية، والعمل بوصفه إشارة سياقية أساسية في الخطاب الطقوسي والسخري. وتؤكد الدراسة أن التعدد الوظيفي المعقّد لسمّ، المرتبط بمسار الإضفاء النحوي، يستلزم اعتماد مقاربة تحليلية متكاملة، كما تقدّم دراسة حالة ذات أهمية نظرية لدعم نماذج الإضفاء النحوي والتغير الدلالي التداولي. وتسهم النتائج في سد فجوة بارزة في دراسات التداولية واللهجات العربية، وتوفّر إطاراً مرجعياً يمكن الاستفادة منه في تطوير البحث في التداولية العربية، ودراسة اللهجات، والتحليل المقارن للعلامات التداولية عبر اللغات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علامات الخطاب التداولية، الإضفاء النحوي، اللهجة النجدية، التهذيب



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Abstract

This study presents the first empirical analysis of the multifunctional discourse-pragmatic marker *Samm* in the understudied context of Najdi Arabic. Despite its high frequency and cultural salience, *Samm* has not been systematically described. Based on 220 naturalistic interactions, this study identifies eight core functions of *Samm*, showing its primary role in interpersonal management (over 70% of uses). The analysis reveals that *Samm* is a grammaticalized resource whose specific meaning is dynamically co-constructed through prosody, sequential context, and shared cultural knowledge, functioning as a face-threat minimizer, a turn-manager, and a key contextualization cue in ritual and sarcastic speech. The paper argues that the complex multifunctionality of *Samm*, rooted in its grammaticalization pathway, necessitates an integrated analytical approach and provides a significant case study for theories of grammaticalization and semantic-pragmatic change, filling a critical gap in Arabic pragmatics and dialectology. The findings thus provide a significant case study for theories of grammaticalization and semantic-pragmatic change, with clear implications for advancing research in Arabic pragmatics, dialectology, and the cross-linguistic study of discourse markers.

Keywords: *discourse-pragmatic markers, grammaticalization, Najdi Arabic, politeness*



Introduction

Language is the primary medium for human communication, serving not only to convey propositional information but also to express internal states and negotiate social relationships within diverse cultural contexts (Brown & Yule, 1983). Speakers use linguistic elements strategically to signal intentions and guide interpretations. These non-propositional elements, broadly termed *discourse-pragmatic markers (DPMs)*, constitute essential resources for structuring discourse, marking speaker stance, and mitigating face threats across languages (Beeching, 2016).

In Arabic sociolinguistics, DPMs exhibit considerable functional diversity, shaped by dialectal variation and cultural norms. While markers in several dialects—such as Egyptian *wallahi* (Mughazy, 2003), Jordanian *ʔa:di* (Kanakri & Al-Harabsheh, 2013), and Yemeni *ʔamaanah* (Al-Zubeiry, 2020)—have been documented, the pragmatic ecology of many Saudi dialects, particularly Najdi Arabic, remains insufficiently investigated. This study addresses this gap by offering the first empirical analysis of the multifunctional marker ‘*Samm*’ in Najdi Arabic, the variety spoken in central Saudi Arabia.

The marker ‘*Samm*’ is deeply embedded in the cultural-linguistic fabric of the region. Its etymology derives from three interrelated sources: (1) the Najdi custom *sammṣan wa ṭaṣan* (“hearing and obedience”), reflecting tribal values of allegiance; (2) the imperative *sammi* (“invoke God’s name”), used ritually when offering hospitality; and (3) the elliptical *sammi ḥajatak* (“name your need”), signaling attentiveness (Abu Zaid, 1996). This rich etymological and semantic heritage has undergone pragmatic bleaching, transforming *Samm* into a frequent and multifunctional particle in contemporary Najdi interaction. Preliminary observations suggest *Samm* functions as a crucial interpersonal resource across multiple contexts, where it mitigates directives, reinforces commissives, signals topic shifts, and conveys affective stances. Despite its salience in daily interaction, no empirical study has systematically documented its pragmatic functions. This omission is particularly significant in light of Najdi Arabic’s sociolinguistic complexity, in which markers such as *Samm* not only encode dialectal identity but also enable speakers to navigate shifting social hierarchies.

Against this backdrop, the present study provides the first systematic, empirical analysis of the marker *Samm*, mapping its multifunctional range to address a significant descriptive gap in Najdi Arabic pragmatics. Moving beyond mere description, this study



makes a twofold theoretical contribution. First, it demonstrates the necessity of integrating Politeness Theory, Conversation Analysis, and Interactional Sociolinguistics to fully account for a marker whose functions span interpersonal, sequential, and cultural domains. Second, by tracing *Samm*'s functional spectrum from its lexical roots to its current pragmatic uses, it offers a robust case study that enriches cross-linguistic models of grammaticalization and semantic-pragmatic change.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

A comprehensive analytical framework is required to understand the multifunctional role of discourse-pragmatic markers (DPMs) like *Samm* in Najdi Arabic and to capture their dynamic functions within conversational interactions. To this end, this study draws upon three prominent theoretical frameworks, Politeness Theory, Conversation Analysis, and Interactional Sociolinguistics, each offering distinct yet complementary insights into how DPMs function as strategic tools for managing social relationships, organizing interaction, and conveying nuanced meaning.

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) explains how speakers use language to maintain social harmony and face needs. The theory proposes that individuals employ politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts—utterances that may potentially damage the positive or negative face of interlocutors.

Positive politeness strategies reinforce social bonds by fostering camaraderie and approval, while negative politeness strategies uphold the interlocutor's autonomy and minimize imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, discourse-pragmatic markers such as *Samm* may operate as politeness devices by softening requests or affirming social rapport, thereby satisfying positive face needs. Conversely, they may also buffer disagreements or signal humility, thus fulfilling negative politeness functions.

Scholars such as Holmes and Stubbe (2015) emphasize that the employment of politeness strategies is highly context-dependent, influenced by social factors such as power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition—a view that is particularly pertinent when analyzing regional speech forms like Najdi Arabic, where '*Samm*' may carry cultural



connotations of politeness or politeness strategies that are embedded in local interaction norms. Fraser (1996) expands on the pragmatic functions of hedging devices and indirect speech acts, illustrating how pragmatic markers serve as linguistic resources to uphold face and social cohesion in various cultural settings.

Recent studies (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Leech, 1983) have furthered the understanding that politeness is not merely a matter of individual choice but reflects deeper social and cultural paradigms that influence linguistic behavior. Analyzing ‘*Samm*’ through this lens offers insights into how regional speech forms operate as politeness strategies within Najdi interactions, reinforcing the social fabric and relational management.

Conversational Analysis

Conversation Analysis (CA), developed by Sacks et al. (1974), provides a rigorous methodological framework for examining how social organization is achieved through talk. CA emphasizes the sequential and rule-governed nature of conversation, focusing on how interlocutors coordinate their actions to produce coherent and mutually intelligible interaction.

Core concepts such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and repair are integral to understanding how discourse-pragmatic markers like *Samm* function in naturally occurring speech. For instance, such markers may signal confirmation, disagreement, or emphasis within adjacency pairs, thereby facilitating smooth turn transitions and regulating conversational flow (Schegloff, 2007). In this sense, *Samm* can be understood as a resource for managing alignment, expressing stance, or initiating repair sequences when misunderstandings arise.

A defining feature of CA is its reliance on detailed transcription and the analysis of interactional cues, such as overlaps, pauses, intonation, and emphasis, that illuminate the nuanced functions of DPMs in real-time discourse. Sidnell and Stivers (2013) underscore the importance of this micro-level analysis for understanding how social actions are accomplished and how linguistic features like *Samm* contribute to interactional organization.

The strength of CA lies in its ability to capture the contextual and sequential placement of *Samm* and to examine how it functions dynamically within interaction, thereby elucidating its role in shaping social meaning.



Interactional Sociolinguistics

Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS), pioneered by John Gumperz (1982), provides a robust framework for understanding how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted through subtle linguistic and non-verbal cues within social interaction. This approach emphasizes that communication is not solely dependent on the explicit content of utterances but is heavily influenced by contextualization cues, such as intonation, gesture, lexical choice, code-switching, and pragmatic markers, that function collectively to produce shared understanding.

Gumperz's (1982) seminal contribution lies in the concept of *contextualization cues*, which serve as "signaling devices" guiding interlocutors in interpreting utterances within particular social and cultural contexts. These cues function in constellations that indicate whether a speaker's utterance should be understood as a joke, sarcasm, praise, or criticism. For instance, the meaning of a discourse-pragmatic marker such as *Samm*, or similar regional expressions, often depends on intonational patterns or accompanying gestures that reveal the speaker's intent—whether to soften a request, convey emphasis, or express disagreement.

Gumperz further demonstrates that interpretive success hinges on shared socio-cultural knowledge. Divergences in such knowledge can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of pragmatic markers, which may carry different connotations across communities or social groups. Kecskes (2012) reinforces this point by showing how cross-cultural interactions are vulnerable to miscommunication when cues are misinterpreted or when shared interpretive frameworks are lacking. In Najdi Arabic, for example, *Samm* may function as a politeness marker, an emphatic device, or a signal of irony, depending on contextual cues such as intonation, facial expressions, and situational context.

Subsequent scholars have extended Gumperz's foundational insights by integrating ethnographic methods with microanalysis of talk, highlighting the role of socialization processes in shaping interpretive frameworks (Duranti, 1997). Kecskes (2012) argues that pragmatic markers like *Samm* should be examined not only for their linguistic form but also within their socio-cultural environment, since their functions are both culturally and contextually embedded.

Moreover, IS contributes to understanding how social hierarchies, identities, and group memberships influence the deployment and interpretation of pragmatic markers. It offers tools for analyzing how speakers signal politeness, solidarity, or resistance through



subtle cues, and how these cues are differently interpreted depending on cultural and contextual backgrounds. This makes IS particularly valuable for studying regional speech features such as *Samm*, which may perform multiple pragmatic functions—politeness, emphasis, or social distancing—depending on the surrounding constellation of cues.

Previous Related Studies

The study of linguistic elements that contribute to ideational, interpersonal, and structural meaning in spoken discourse has a well-established tradition. This domain of inquiry is marked by terminological diversity, most notably in the distinction between discourse markers (DMs) and pragmatic markers (PMs). Scholars such as Schiffrin (1987) and Schourup (1999) typically employ the term *discourse markers* to highlight their role in structuring discourse and ensuring textual coherence. In contrast, researchers like Beeching (2016) and Fraser (1996) favor the term *pragmatic markers* to underscore their interpersonal, attitudinal, and speaker-oriented functions. Given that this study addresses both textual and interpersonal dimensions, the term ‘discourse-pragmatic markers’ (DPMs) is adopted as an inclusive label. The functional versatility of English D/PMs—exemplified by items such as *well*, *you know*, and *I mean*—has been thoroughly documented across both standard and variational contexts (De Klerk, 2005; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999).

This analytical tradition finds a robust parallel in research on spoken Arabic varieties, which reveals a diverse system of D/PMs that perform essential pragmatic and discursive functions. Existing research can be synthesized along two main dimensions: functional scope and contextual motivation.

A central finding across studies is the pronounced multifunctionality of individual markers. For example, the Libyan Arabic marker *bahi* (“okay”) is used to signal agreement, issue warnings, express admiration, or close arguments (Ahmed, 2014). Similarly, in Jordanian Arabic, the marker *?a:di* (“ok”) functions as a versatile tool for managing interaction, appearing in contexts that range from seeking permission and expressing scorn to demonstrating courtesy and preserving face (Kanakri & Al-Harabsheh, 2013). This multifunctionality is further illustrated by the Yemeni pragmatic marker *?amaanah*, which performs eight distinct functions, including marking an oath and expressing epistemic stance (Al-Zubeiry, 2020), and by the Moroccan Arabic marker *waxa*, which a recent study has shown to serve eighteen distinct functions across interactional and syntactic domains (Said,



2025). A particularly nuanced case is presented by Almosa (2023), whose variationist analysis of *ya3ni* in Najdi Arabic not only demonstrates its multifunctionality but also shows that its functions are systematically constrained by turn position. Studies of temporal adverbs grammaticalized into markers in Saudi Arabic, such as *halhen* (Almohawes, 2023) and *ʔhin* (Alrajhi, 2019), reinforce this pattern by detailing their roles in structuring discourse and managing interpretive relevance.

Another major strand of research highlights the role of DPMs in mitigating face-threatening acts and negotiating social hierarchy. A well-documented example is the Egyptian Arabic oath particle *wallahi*, which functions both as a politeness strategy to soften criticism and as a marker of social authority (Mughazy, 2003). This mitigating function is a cross-dialectal phenomenon, also evident in the Yemeni *ʔamaanah* (Al-Zubeiry, 2020) and the Najdi Arabic marker *ya3ni*, which speakers employ to minimize disagreement and thereby maintain interpersonal harmony (Almosa, 2023). The Saudi marker *maʔnaʔsak* illustrates a more specialized form of negative politeness: its functions—including refusal, reprimanding, and expressing indifference—create interpersonal distance and safeguard autonomy (Al Rousan, 2015). Even more general markers, such as Lebanese *tayyeb* (“well”) and Egyptian *tab/tayyeb* (“ok”), are regularly recruited for mitigation and acknowledgment (Al-Batal, 1994; Ismail, 2015).

Beyond interpersonal management, DPMs also play a fundamental role in organizing discourse. Research on Lebanese Arabic demonstrates this structural function clearly: *bass* (“but”) marks adversative relations, *halla* (“now”) signals topic shifts, and *ba’a* (“so”) indicates conclusive relationships (Al-Batal, 1994). The religious marker *inshallah* in Jordanian Arabic illustrates a semantic shift into the discursal domain, where it acquires illocutionary force to perform directive and commissive speech acts (Farghal, 1995). In Najdi Arabic, the marker *ya3ni* exemplifies a device dedicated to textual management, employed by speakers to introduce elaboration, clarify intention, shift topics, summarize arguments, and maintain the conversational floor (Almosa, 2023).

This discourse-structuring function is often associated with processes of grammaticalization, whereby lexical items evolve to fulfill grammatical or pragmatic roles. A particularly clear case is offered by Al-Daher et al. (2024) in their analysis of Jordanian Arabic *halaʔ* (“now”). Their study carefully documents its dual existence as both a temporal adverb and a fully grammaticalized discourse marker. In the latter role, it performs six



pragmatic functions essential for managing conversational flow: changing topics, introducing contrast, marking disagreement, initiating explanations, listing, and signaling shifts in speaker orientation or “footing.” This study provides an important model for understanding the developmental trajectory of pragmatic markers, demonstrating how lexical forms undergo systematic extension into pragmatic functions and thereby enriching accounts of language change.

In conclusion, the existing literature demonstrates that DPMs in Arabic dialects are not peripheral features but rather essential, multifunctional tools for structuring information, managing speaker–hearer relationships, and encoding cultural as well as pragmatic nuance. The consistency of these findings across dialects ranging from the Levant to the Arabian Peninsula underscores their central role in the mechanics of spoken Arabic communication. Moreover, studies such as Al-Daher et al. (2024) have begun to trace the grammaticalization pathways of these markers, moving beyond functional description to account for their origins and development within the linguistic system.

Despite this expanding body of research on markers such as *ya3ni*, *hala?*, *halhen*, and *?lhin*, the marker *Samm*—a high-frequency and culturally salient particle in Najdi Arabic—remains virtually unexamined. The present study seeks to address this gap. Building on the methodological and theoretical foundations of previous research, it offers the first empirical analysis of *Samm*, systematically mapping its multifunctional range in everyday interaction. In doing so, it contributes to a fuller understanding of the pragmatic ecology of Najdi Arabic, advances cross-dialectal research on Arabic DPMs, and provides a fresh case study for theories of semantic–pragmatic change and grammaticalization.

Methods

Research Design, Data Collection, and Contexts

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the multifunctional nature of the discourse-pragmatic marker *Samm* in Najdi Arabic. Recognizing that the meaning of pragmatic particles is deeply embedded in cultural context and co-constructed in real-time interaction, this design prioritized deep immersion in the speech community and naturalistic observation over controlled elicitation (Angrosino, 2007). The primary method of data collection was participant observation, with data documented



through the systematic compilation of ethnographic fieldnotes. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the nuanced, context-dependent use of *Samm* within authentic social interactions while avoiding the potential influence of recording equipment on participants' behavior.

Data collection was carried out over a two-month period of intensive fieldwork in central Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the fieldwork was conducted in the city of Riyadh and in towns within Al-Qassim province, including Buraydah and Unaizah, which are representative urban and semi-urban Najdi speech communities in central Saudi Arabia. The researcher engaged in a wide range of naturally occurring social settings central to Najdi daily life, including family gatherings (*majlis*), informal social visits among friends, and routine service encounters in banks, shops, and government offices. The study focused on a core group of approximately 50–60 male native Najdi speakers aged 20–65, representing diverse professional and social backgrounds. Due to cultural norms of gender segregation, participant observation and data collection took place in male settings; consequently, the documented uses of *Samm* derive exclusively from male speech. This purposive selection ensured exposure to a wide range of social hierarchies, levels of formality, and speech events where *Samm* was likely to occur. To protect participants' identities, all personal names used in the examples are pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information was anonymized during data documentation and analysis.

A two-stage data collection procedure was designed to balance accuracy and ecological validity. Immediately after an instance of *Samm* occurred, the researcher discreetly made brief jotted notes, recording key elements such as the participants, their relationship, the sequential context, and salient paralinguistic features (e.g., “elongated vowel,” “flat intonation,” “sarcastic tone”). Within hours, these notes were expanded into comprehensive ethnographic fieldnotes, producing a detailed narrative account that included direct quotations (as accurately recalled), descriptions of the non-verbal and contextual environment, and preliminary reflections on the perceived function of *Samm*.

Data Analysis and Rigor

The corpus of fieldnotes was analyzed using an inductive, data-driven approach informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded in several structured stages. First, instances of *Samm* were



identified and extracted from the data. Each token was then systematically coded according to its sequential position in interaction, prosodic features (as documented in the fieldnotes), and the interactional activity in progress. Following this, broader functional categories were developed iteratively through a process of constant comparison across tokens and contexts. The resulting functional taxonomy, along with the frequency of occurrence for each category, is presented in the findings. It is critical to note that these frequency counts (n) and percentages (%) are provided to give a descriptive overview of the distribution within the observed corpus; they are not the product of inferential statistical testing. Given the qualitative design that prioritizes depth of context over breadth of data, these figures should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than statistically representative proportions.

To ensure analytic rigor and trustworthiness, aligned with the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the study employed a multi-faceted strategy. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation of data across diverse social settings—including family *majlis*, peer groups, and service encounters—which allowed for cross-verification of pragmatic functions. Dependability was supported through iterative re-analysis of the data over a six-month period, which ensured the stability of interpretations over time. The coding scheme and emergent functional categories were further reviewed and refined in consultation with two senior colleagues specializing in Arabic pragmatics. To secure confirmability, systematic member checking was conducted wherein emergent interpretations—including the proposed link between prosodic descriptions and pragmatic functions—were cross-checked with native Najdi informants, thereby validating the analyses against insider intuitions. Confirmability was further strengthened through reflexivity, whereby the researcher continually documented and critically examined personal assumptions in a research journal. A rigorous audit trail was maintained, comprising all jotted notes, expanded fieldnotes, and reflective journals, to ensure the consistency and traceability of all analytical decisions (Morse, 2018; Schwandt et al., 2007).

Methodological Rationale and Validation

The methodological design of this study was guided by the principle of ecological validity, prioritizing the capture of authentic, naturally occurring interaction in culturally grounded settings. Recognizing that the presence of recording equipment could alter



participant behavior and introduce the observer's paradox—particularly in sensitive contexts such as the family *majlis*—the research employed a systematic ethnographic approach based on participant observation and detailed fieldnotes. This method is well-established in interactional sociolinguistics for its ability to provide rich, contextually embedded data that is essential for analyzing the nuanced, co-constructed nature of pragmatic markers (Gumperz, 1982).

A key aspect of this approach involved the meticulous documentation of prosodic features, which are integral to the function of *Samm*. A two-stage data collection protocol was implemented to ensure accuracy: brief, contemporaneous jottings of paralinguistic cues (e.g., “elongated vowel,” “rising intonation”) were expanded into comprehensive ethnographic fieldnotes within hours of each interaction. This process preserved a detailed record of the vocal delivery alongside its sequential and social context.

To validate these observational data and ensure analytical trustworthiness, a rigorous triangulation procedure was employed. The proposed link between the documented prosodic features and their interpreted pragmatic functions was systematically cross-checked with native Najdi informants in member-checking sessions. This process confirmed that the descriptions resonated with native speaker intuition, thereby securing the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, while the study forgoes acoustic analysis, the combination of immersive ethnography, immediate descriptive notation, and systematic validation with cultural insiders provides a robust and reliable foundation for the functional analysis of *Samm*.

Findings

This study set out to empirically explore and describe the multifunctional nature of the discourse-pragmatic marker *Samm* in Najdi Arabic. Drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes and integrated theoretical frameworks, this analysis shows how *Samm* functions as a critical resource for managing relationships and organizing discourse. The following section presents the findings of the analysis of naturally occurring interactions. The eight primary functions identified for *Samm*, along with their frequency of occurrence, defining prosodic features, and typical contexts, are summarized in Table 1.

The prosodic cues referenced in this section were inferred through systematic ethnographic fieldnotes and validated via member checking, as detailed in Sections 3.1–3.3.



Table 1

Functions of the Marker Samm in Najdi Arabic: Frequency (n) and Percentage (%)

Function	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Face-Threat Minimizer	65	29.5%
Signaling Willingness	58	26.4%
Acknowledging a Summons	42	19.1%
Turn-Management Signal	38	17.3%
Repair Initiation	35	15.9%
Ritual Offer Marker	55	25.0%
Sarcastic Marker	15	6.8%
Attentive Service Marker	40	18.2%
Total	220	100%

As summarized in Table 1, the analysis of 220 instances reveals a clear functional distribution. The three most frequent functions are all interpersonal, collectively accounting for over 70% of all uses: Face-Threat Minimizer (29.5%, n=65), Signaling Willingness (26.4%, n=58), and Ritual Offer Marker (25.0%, n=55). Functions related to conversational structure, such as Turn-Management (17.3%, n=38) and Repair Initiation (15.9%, n=35), along with the Attentive Service Marker (18.2%, n=40), were moderately frequent. The Sarcastic Marker (6.8%, n=15) was the least attested function.

This analysis of each instance within its interactional context demonstrates that *Samm* is a multifunctional marker whose specific meaning is co-constructed through its sequential placement, prosodic delivery, and the interlocutors' shared cultural knowledge. The findings are organized below according to three emergent, and often overlapping, functional domains that highlight its core roles: interpersonal politeness, conversational structuring, and contextualization. These examples illustrate that *Samm* is not a fixed or monolithic marker but rather a versatile discourse-pragmatic resource whose function is dynamically negotiated through context, intonation, and social dynamics.



Interpersonal Politeness and Face Management

A predominant function of *Samm* is to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) and to signal cooperative intent, aligning closely with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. In particular, it fulfills three key politeness roles: functioning as a negative politeness strategy to minimize imposition, as a positive politeness strategy to convey cooperation and solidarity, and as a marker of deference to acknowledge social hierarchy. This function is illustrated in the following examples drawn from the study's corpus.

Face-Threat Minimizer

A face-threat minimizer is a pragmatic strategy employed to reduce the potential threat to an individual's "face," or self-image, during interactions that involve requests, impositions, or other acts that may threaten face. This function is prosodically marked by a neutral, short delivery, which helps to reframe compliance as willing cooperation.

Situation 1: During a checkpoint stop, an officer requested Sami's license and registration.

Police officer: ruxṣah wa istimara

[License and Vehicle Registration]

Sami: Samm.

[Here you go, please.]

Police officer: teslem.

[Thank you]

This situation demonstrates how *Samm* functions as a negative politeness strategy by minimizing the face threat inherent in the officer's request. The routine traffic stop represents a potential imposition on Sami's autonomy (i.e., his negative face want). By employing *Samm* in his response, Sami reframes a compulsory act as a willing and cooperative gesture, thereby reducing social friction and facilitating smoother interaction. This example aligns with the study's broader aim of documenting how *Samm* operates as an interpersonal resource for mitigating face threats in Najdi spoken Arabic.

Signaling Willingness

This function involves using *Samm* to express readiness to comply and cooperative intent when responding to requests or commands. It is characterized by a neutral and prompt prosodic delivery, which reinforces the speaker's immediate and cooperative stance.



Situation 2: Malek is being discharged from the hospital. The nurse needs him to sign his discharge paperwork.

Nurse: (holding out paperwork and pen)

“Malek, لازم tuwaqqf haði estemarah alxuru:j.”

[*Malek, you need to sign this form of discharge.*]

Malek: (taking the pen promptly)

“*Samm.*”

[*here/I will.*]

Nurse: yfṭeek alṣafyah.

[*Thank you*]

Here, *Samm* functions as a positive politeness strategy by signaling immediate willingness to comply with the directive. Malek’s use of the marker demonstrates his cooperative orientation and affirms the shared objective of completing the discharge process efficiently. This example supports the study’s broader aim of examining how *Samm* operates as an interpersonal resource for managing social relationships by displaying compliance and mitigating potential face threats.

Acknowledging a Summons

This function involves using *Samm* to signal recognition of a summons and to indicate responsiveness, typically conveying respect and attentiveness. The prosody is neutral and respectful, affirming social hierarchy and attentiveness.

Situation 3: Within a family majlis, an elderly grandfather seeks his grandson Hamad's help.

Grandfather: “Ya Hamad!”

(*O Hamad! [summoning his grandson]*)

Hamad: “Samm, aṭal Allah ṣumrak!”

(*[Hearing you], may Allah extend your life!*)

Grandfather: “Ya walad, jeebli almiswak min alṭlajah.”

(*Son, hand me the miswak from the refrigerator.*)

In this interaction, *Samm* functions as an acknowledgment token that conveys respect within the family hierarchy. Hamad’s use of the marker signals immediate responsiveness to his grandfather’s summons, thereby affirming the social relationship and displaying deference. This example illustrates how *Samm* operates as a resource for navigating social hierarchies and



sustaining interpersonal harmony, supporting the study's aim of documenting the marker's role in Najdi social interaction.

Conversational Structure and Management

Beyond its interpersonal role, *Samm* plays a crucial part in organizing the flow of conversation, a function illuminated by Conversation Analysis. In particular, it fulfills two organizational functions: as a turn-management signal that regulates speaker transitions and as a repair initiator that addresses comprehension difficulties. The following examples from the research corpus illustrate these functions.

Turn-Management Signal

This function involves using *Samm* to manage conversational flow, particularly by allocating turns and signaling readiness either to listen or to yield the floor. It is marked by short, flat intonation, which signals floor-yielding without emotional affect.

Situation 4: Phone call between Khalid and colleague Yousef.

Khalid (warm but direct): "alsalam ʕalikum Yousef! kaifak alḥal? kull ši'tamam?"

(Peace be upon you! How are you? All good?)

Yousef (distractedly friendly): "waʕalikum alsalam. alḥamdulillah. Ahlak ṭayabeen?"

(And peace upon you. Thanks God. Your family well?)

Khalid: "Allah yaxalleek. Naʕm, alḥamdulillah. Bas... ittaṣalt ʕashan axuḏ rayak fii mauḏuʕ muhem."

(God preserve you. Yes, Thanks God. But... I called to get your opinion on an important matter.)

Yousef (shifting focus, neutral tone): "Samm."

(Go ahead.)

(Short, flat intonation – no elongation)

Khalid: "Fii aljumʕah aljayah, ʕendi liqa maʕa mustaḥmireen..."

(This coming Friday, I have a meeting with investors...)

In this telephone conversation, Yousef's use of *Samm* with a short, flat intonation functions as a continuer, managing turn-taking. It signals that he has yielded the floor and is giving Khalid the go-ahead to elaborate on the main topic. This example illustrates how *Samm* operates as a



structural device for organizing discourse and facilitating topic transitions, thereby supporting the study's aim of documenting its role in conversational management.

Repair Initiation (Request for Clarification)

This function involves using *Samm* to signal a problem in hearing or understanding, typically marked by distinctive prosodic features that differentiate it from other uses. It is characterized by rising intonation and vowel elongation, which signal a need for repetition or clarification.

Situation 5: Busy STC branch during peak hours. Khalid is at the counter with Rep Fahad to resolve a billing issue.

Rep Fahad (scanning screen rapidly, monotone): “Teqdim bişakwa řaber tařbeeř mystc ...”
(Lodge a complaint via mystc app ...).

Khalid (confused by the last term): “Saaam?” (*Rising intonation clearly indicated*)

Rep Fahad (pointing to STC App on his mobile): “řamel haři altařbeeř řli jawalak wa erřř řakwa, au etařal řla xedmat alřumala 900!”

(Download this application on your phone and file a complaint or call Customer Service 900).

Here, *Samm* with rising intonation functions as a next-turn repair initiator, signaling difficulty in understanding the technical term. The prosodic features—namely elongation and rising pitch—are essential for distinguishing this function from others. This example illustrates how *Samm* supports conversational management by facilitating understanding and maintaining communication flow, thereby aligning with the study's aim of documenting the marker's role in discourse organization.

Contextualization and Stance Marking

As an Interactional Sociolinguistic resource, *Samm* functions as a powerful contextualization cue, indicating how an utterance is to be interpreted within specific cultural and situational contexts. Its meaning is often shaped by a combination of prosodic features and shared cultural knowledge, enabling it to perform three distinct contextual functions, as illustrated in the following examples.



Offering Ritual Marker

This function involves using *Samm* as part of a culturally embedded ritual of offering, particularly within contexts of hospitality and generosity. It is delivered with a neutral, ritualistic prosody that reinforces the scripted nature of the exchange.

Situation 6: Thamer is sitting at his desk in the office coffee station area. Fahed approaches holding a cup of coffee.

Fahed (extending cup):

“*Samm.*”

Thamer (accepts cup while seated):

“*Samm Allah ṣaduak.*”

This exchange illustrates *Samm*'s role in ritualized offering sequences deeply embedded in Najdi cultural practices. The marker functions as a pragmatic resource for enacting hospitality and generosity, with both participants engaging in a culturally scripted exchange. This example reinforces the study's aim of demonstrating how *Samm* encodes cultural norms and facilitates socially meaningful interaction in Najdi Arabic.

Sarcastic Marker

This function involves using *Samm* with specific prosodic features to convey sarcasm or ironic commentary, typically to express disapproval or underscore incongruity. It is marked by a rising-falling intonation and elongated vowel, which convey irony and affective stance.

Situation 7: IT office after nighttime server outage caused by colleague Fahad.

Fahad (cheerfully): “Ya šabab, lazim nħafiz ʕla saʕat alnaum! Entu teħasibu alserver ħayatšalaħ min nafsuh?”

(*Guys, we really need to protect our sleep hours! Did you think the server would fix itself?*)

Ali (staring deadpan, voice dripping with sarcasm): “Saaaam?”

(*Oh reeeally?/Do tell?*)

(*Rising-falling intonation, elongated vowel, heavy with irony*)

Fahad (shifting uncomfortably): “ṭayeb... ana ašlan ma kunt adri anna alxaṭa minni!”

(*Well... I didn't even know the mistake was mine!*)

This situation illustrates how prosody and context can significantly reshape *Samm*'s meaning. Through the elongated vowel and rising–falling intonation, the marker becomes a vehicle for



sarcastic commentary, conveying disapproval and emphasizing the absurdity of Fahad's statement. This example underscores the study's finding that *Samm*'s meaning is not inherent but is dynamically constructed through vocal cues and shared situational knowledge.

Attentive Service Marker

This function involves using *Samm* in formal service encounters to signal professional attentiveness and readiness to assist clients. It is delivered with a neutral pitch and professional tone, often accompanied by sustained eye contact and open body language.

Situation 8: National Commercial Bank, Riyadh. Peak hours.

Ahmad (placing ID on counter): "alsalam ʕlikum."

(Peace be upon you.)

Bank Clerk (nodding professionally): "waʕlikum alsalam."

(And upon you be peace.)

(Brief pause, hands poised over keyboard)

Bank Clerk (leaning slightly forward): "Samm."

(How can I help you?) → Neutral pitch, sustained eye contact, palms open on counter

Ahmad (pushing documents forward): "abʕa aftaḥ ḥisab jadeed lil-istiḙmar."

(I want to open a new investment account.)

The bank clerk's use of *Samm* functions as a professional conversational opener that frames the interaction as a service encounter. When combined with a neutral pitch, sustained eye contact, and open body language, it facilitates the transition beyond the greeting phase and invites the client to state their business. This example illustrates how *Samm* operates as a contextualization cue that establishes interactional frames and supports service-oriented communication.

The empirical analysis of naturalistic interactions provides compelling evidence that the discourse-pragmatic marker *Samm* in Najdi Arabic functions as a highly versatile and context-dependent linguistic resource. Rather than possessing a fixed meaning, its function is dynamically co-constructed in the moment of speaking through an intricate interplay of sequential placement, prosodic delivery, and the interlocutors' shared cultural knowledge.

The findings confirm that *Samm* operates across three primary, often overlapping, domains: (1) interpersonal politeness, where it serves as a tool for face management by minimizing impositions, signaling cooperation, and acknowledging social hierarchies; (2)



conversational structure, where it functions as a device for organizing talk-in-interaction by regulating speaker transitions and initiating repairs; and (3) contextualization and stance, where it operates as a cue that frames interactions according to cultural scripts—from ritualized offers of hospitality to sarcastic irony or professional attentiveness.

Crucially, this study shows that the specific meaning of *Samm* is not inherent to the form itself but is determined by context. Prosodic features such as short, flat intonation signal a turn-taking function, while elongation and rising intonation may transform it into a repair initiator or a marker of sarcasm. This multifunctionality makes *Samm* an essential resource for navigating the complexities of Najdi social life, enabling speakers to manage relationships, structure discourse, and invoke cultural norms through a single, highly conventionalized marker. The findings thus establish *Samm* as a core component of interactional competence in Najdi Arabic, whose meaning is continually negotiated within the emergent flow of conversation.

From a broader Najdi and regional perspective, *Samm* can be productively compared with other high-frequency discourse-pragmatic markers such as *yafni* and *wallah*. While *yafni* primarily functions as an explanatory and discourse-organizational marker—used to elaborate, reformulate, or maintain the conversational floor (Almosa, 2023)—*Samm* is more tightly associated with interpersonal alignment and immediate responsiveness, often indexing willingness, attentiveness, or deference. Similarly, *wallah*, widely attested across Arabic dialects, frequently operates as an epistemic and stance marker that conveys sincerity, emphasis, or mitigation (Mughazy, 2003). In contrast, *Samm* rarely encodes epistemic commitment; instead, it functions as a culturally grounded contextualization cue whose meaning is largely shaped by sequential position and prosodic delivery. This comparison highlights that, although these markers may co-occur within Najdi interaction, *Samm* occupies a distinct pragmatic niche centered on interpersonal management and culturally routinized interactional frames rather than on explanation or evidential stance.

Discussion

The empirical analysis of *Samm* not only maps its functional range but also illuminates two interconnected theoretical issues: its developmental pathway via grammaticalization and its role in the dynamic, emergent negotiation of politeness within interaction. Grounded in ethnographic fieldnotes, the investigation reveals *Samm* as a



multifunctional resource indispensable for navigating the complexities of social interaction and discourse structure in Najdi Arabic. The findings, summarized quantitatively in Table 1 and elaborated qualitatively in the preceding section, can be interpreted in light of the existing literature on Arabic DPMs and the theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

First, *Samm*'s multifunctionality aligns with a key theme in Arabic DPM research. Its functional range—from frequent uses in face-threat mitigation (29.5%) and signaling willingness (26.4%) to rarer ones like sarcasm (6.8%)—parallels other multifunctional markers such as the Libyan *bahi* (Ahmed, 2014), Yemeni *?amaanah* (Al-Zubeiry, 2020), and Moroccan *waxa* (Said, 2025). Furthermore, the findings corroborate recent studies on Najdi Arabic specifically, demonstrating a consistent pattern of grammaticalization from lexical to pragmatic meaning, as seen in *ya3ni* (Almosa, 2023) and the now-equivalents *halhen* (Almohawes, 2023) and *?lhin* (Alrajhi, 2019). The crucial role of prosody and sequential placement in constraining *Samm*'s function—echoing Almosa's (2023) analysis of *ya3ni*—underscores the importance of a micro-analytic approach for capturing the nuances of these markers. More significantly, the findings demonstrate that a full account of a marker like *Samm* necessitates an integrated theoretical framework, as its functions seamlessly traverse the domains of social relationship management (Politeness Theory), sequential organization (CA), and cultural framing (IS).

Second, while the identified functions have been categorized for analytical clarity, the boundaries between them are often permeable. A single token of *Samm* can frequently serve overlapping functions; for example, “Signaling Willingness” (Situation 2) simultaneously mitigates a face threat, while an “Acknowledgment of a Summons” (Situation 3) is also a display of positive politeness. This functional fluidity is not a methodological limitation but a defining characteristic of a highly grammaticalized pragmatic marker. It demonstrates that *Samm*'s meaning is not fixed but dynamically co-constructed and responsive to the unfolding interaction, the relationship between speakers, and the cultural script being enacted.

Third, a significant strand of the findings highlights *Samm*'s primary role in managing interpersonal dynamics and politeness. The high combined frequency of its face-management functions (approximately 75% of all instances) strongly suggests that its core utility lies in negotiating social hierarchy and cooperation. Its function as a negative politeness strategy to minimize impositions parallels the mitigating role of markers such as Yemeni *?amaanah* (Al-Zubeiry, 2020). At the same time, *Samm* exhibits a specialized role that deepens our



understanding of the Najdi politeness system. Unlike the Saudi DPM *ma?nafsak*, which creates interpersonal distance through refusals and reprimands (Al Rousan, 2015), *Samm* frequently operates in the opposite direction: it bridges social gaps and fosters closeness through offers, attentive service, and signals of willingness, thereby fulfilling positive face needs. This pattern suggests a sophisticated politeness system in Najdi Arabic, in which different DPMs are deployed in complementary, context-specific strategies of face management.

Furthermore, the behavior of *Samm* invites a refinement of Politeness Theory within the Najdi cultural context. While the theory provides a useful heuristic, *Samm*'s ability to simultaneously fulfill positive and negative politeness functions—for instance, in bridging social gaps through offers while also signaling deference—challenges a strictly dichotomous application. It suggests that in close-knit, high-context societies, the management of involvement and independence is often achieved through a single, multifunctional resource that is dynamically interpreted, rather than through discrete strategic choices. Thus, *Samm* does not just *use* politeness strategies; it embodies the complex interplay of social values that define Najdi interaction.

In addition to its interpersonal functions, *Samm* is fundamental to discourse organization. Its roles in repair initiation (15.9%) and turn management (17.3%) are classic discourse-structuring functions that ensure conversational coherence and facilitate topic progression, consistent with research on Lebanese *bass* and *halla* (Al-Batal, 1994). Its developmental trajectory—from etymological roots in “hearing” and “obedience” to its current status as a pragmatically bleached particle, most frequently seen in the ritual offer function (25.0%)—provides a compelling case study in grammaticalization. This trajectory parallels the pathway outlined for Jordanian *hala?* by Al-Daher et al. (2024), thereby enriching the cross-dialectal model of how lexical items evolve to serve grammatical and pragmatic purposes in Arabic.

Finally, viewed through the lens of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982), *Samm* functions as a powerful contextualization cue. Its meaning is not inherent but dynamically co-constructed through prosodic features and non-verbal signals. The quantitative data lends support to this: neutral prosody is tied to high-frequency, cooperative functions, while marked prosody (elongation, pitch shift) signals a shift to less common, often interpersonal, functions like repair or sarcasm. The stark contrast between a sincere,



ritualized offer of coffee (25.0% of instances) and a sarcastic, elongated retort (6.8% of instances) exemplifies this point: meaning depends entirely on the constellation of cues and shared cultural knowledge. A misinterpretation of these cues can lead to communicative breakdown, much like the cross-cultural misunderstandings in Gumperz's (1982) seminal work. Thus, this study argues that *Samm* is more than a linguistic device; it is a crystallized cultural artifact and a vital component of interactional competence. Its analysis provides a model for understanding how grammaticalization, politeness, and contextualization converge in a single linguistic form, thereby contributing to a more integrated theory of discourse-pragmatic markers.

Conclusion

This study has provided the first empirical mapping of the multifunctional marker *Samm* in Najdi Arabic, addressing a significant gap in the literature. The analysis of 220 naturally occurring interactions among male speakers identified eight distinct functions, revealing *Samm* as a versatile resource essential for mitigating face threats, organizing conversational structure, and contextualizing speaker stance through nuanced prosodic and cultural cues. The quantitative distribution of these functions underscores its primary role in socio-pragmatic management, with the three core interpersonal functions (Face-Threat Minimizer, Signaling Willingness, Ritual Offer Marker) accounting for the majority (80.9%) of its usage.

The implications of this study are threefold. Theoretically, it underscores the value of integrated frameworks—Politeness Theory, CA, and IS—for capturing the complexity of DPMs, whose functions span social, sequential, and cultural domains. It also advances scholarship on semantic–pragmatic change by illustrating *Samm*'s grammaticalization pathway from a lexically rich term to a pragmatically bleached, multifunctional marker. Methodologically, the study highlights the efficacy of ethnographic immersion and detailed fieldnotes for documenting the contextual and prosodic features fundamental to pragmatic meaning, while also acknowledging the challenge of analyzing prosody without audio recordings. Practically, the findings have significant implications for intercultural communication and translation. Professionals engaging with Saudi society can benefit from an awareness of *Samm* to navigate social and service interactions more effectively, while



translators and interpreters working with Najdi Arabic require sensitivity to its nuanced pragmatic functions to ensure accurate and culturally appropriate renderings.

While this study establishes important groundwork, it also opens several avenues for further research. Future work would benefit from a larger and more diversified corpus to enable a variational analysis of *Samm*'s use across different age groups and, critically, within female speech communities, as the current data is limited to male speakers. Comparative research examining the use of *Samm* across other Gulf Arabic varieties (e.g., Hijazi, Kuwaiti, or Emirati dialects) could also reveal important sociolinguistic and pragmatic contrasts, further illuminating how similar markers evolve and function in related yet distinct cultural contexts. Incorporating audio-recorded data would permit the acoustic analysis of the prosodic features identified as crucial here. A comparative approach analyzing *Samm* alongside other high-frequency Najdi markers such as *ya3ni* and *wallah* could provide a more holistic understanding of the dialect's pragmatic ecology. Experimental designs might also be developed to probe how non-native speakers interpret prosodic variations of *Samm*, with direct applications for language teaching.

Ultimately, by tracing the functional spectrum of *Samm* and establishing its core interpersonal role, this research contributes to Arabic pragmatics and dialectology while offering a valuable case study for cross-linguistic research on the intricate interplay between language, culture, and social interaction.

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